

Testimony of Kelvin A. Jeremiah
President & CEO of the Philadelphia Housing Authority
City Council, City of Philadelphia
Monday, February 9, 2015

Good morning, Chairman O'Brien, Councilman Henon, and members of the Committee on the Disabled and Special Needs. I am Kelvin A. Jeremiah, President & CEO of the Philadelphia Housing Authority, the fourth largest housing authority in the United States, serving over 80,000 low-income Philadelphians. PHA owns and manages over 14,000 public housing units throughout the city. We also administer the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program, which serves over 17,000 low-income households.

PHA is committed to providing affordable housing opportunities to the city's most vulnerable populations, including persons with disabilities. There are nearly **2,500**¹ occupied units with reasonable accommodation features within PHA's assisted housing portfolio. The more than 100 wheelchair users on our waiting list are being prioritized for units.

As you know, there is an incredible and increasing demand for affordable housing in Philadelphia. With a low unit turnover rate that averages just over 400 units per year, applicants can be on the waitlist for years, some as long as a decade. However, PHA maintains a separate waitlist for wheelchair users and persons requesting reasonable accommodations, which tends to be shorter. Only wheelchair users can occupy PHA's wheelchair-accessible units. PHA is also committed to offering residents with disabilities reasonable accommodations, which includes making modifications to units to meet the specific medical or disability needs of the resident. Examples of such modifications may include stair lifts, strobe lights, automatic doors, ramps, and elevators.

Given the high demand for affordable housing, PHA has undertaken an ambitious development agenda to increase the number of affordable housing in the city, including housing for persons with disabilities. As part of this effort, PHA currently has several new developments in the pipeline or under construction, including Oakdale and Gordon Streets in Strawberry Mansion; and Queen's Row and Queen Lane in Germantown. When these

¹ This number represents occupied units in Public Housing, Alternatively Managed Entities (AMEs), and the Housing Choice Voucher Program.

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developments are complete, PHA will have an additional 11 units that meet Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards and Section 504 requirements.²

Consistent with federal regulations, new developments constructed by PHA will, at a minimum, include 5-10 percent fully accessible units to give persons with disabilities greater freedom to choose where they live, and to enjoy their homes and the amenities PHA provides.

Additionally, PHA has been a part of the Nursing Home Transition Initiative since 2006, receiving referrals from a number of service partners. Since the initiative's inception, PHA has successfully transitioned over **150 residents** out of nursing homes back into communities and homes of their choice, which helps save the state money, while also affording residents with long-term disabilities the opportunity to live independently.

In order to increase the number of affordable units for persons with disabilities, PHA has also awarded project-based vouchers and operating subsidies to organizations and developers who share our mission like Liberty Resources, 1260 Housing, and Inglis House. To date, PHA has designated **245 project-based vouchers** for persons with disabilities, which we expect to increase in the near future based on funding availability. Our partners have also been instrumental in assisting the authority as we continue to outreach to persons with disabilities.

Make no mistake about it, PHA cannot address the affordable housing crisis, and the housing needs of persons with disabilities alone. That is why I believe the partnerships we have established and continue to build upon are so crucial. Indeed, the issue of affordable, accessible housing requires coordination across agencies and disciplines. It does not stop at housing. Oftentimes, persons with disabilities require services, case management, and accommodations so they can live independently.

We must work collaboratively with advocacy agencies and community groups to affirmatively further the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's fair housing initiative. It is not enough just to provide housing or identify impediments. We need to take affirmative steps to eradicate those barriers, increase housing opportunities, and be more proactive in housing persons with disabilities.

² 10 percent or 11 of the 112 new units will be fully 504 compliant, and will be earmarked for persons with disabilities.

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Certainly, one area of concern is the availability of safe, decent, and affordable accessible housing in Philadelphia. PHA knows from experience that it is particularly difficult for voucher holders to find wheelchair accessible housing that meets their needs in the private market. That is why PHA gives private landlords an increased payment standard for an accessible unit up to 110% of the fair market rent (FMR) if the unit's calculated rent comes in higher than the regular FMR. This allows PHA to pay a larger portion of the tenant's rent while ensuring that the unit remains affordable to the tenant, many of whom are on fixed incomes.

Before we can offer the increase in payment standard, the unit must be inspected by a 504 Inspector and verified that it meets the qualifications of an accessible unit. The higher rent incentive is provided only if the tenant requires an accessible unit. We need more incentives to include accommodations and other features that persons with disabilities need. We would also benefit from regulations that include a philanthropic requirement for developers to provide more affordable and accessible housing opportunities in the city.

I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on this important topic, and I look forward to working with you to address this important housing issue.

I am happy to answer any questions the members may have.